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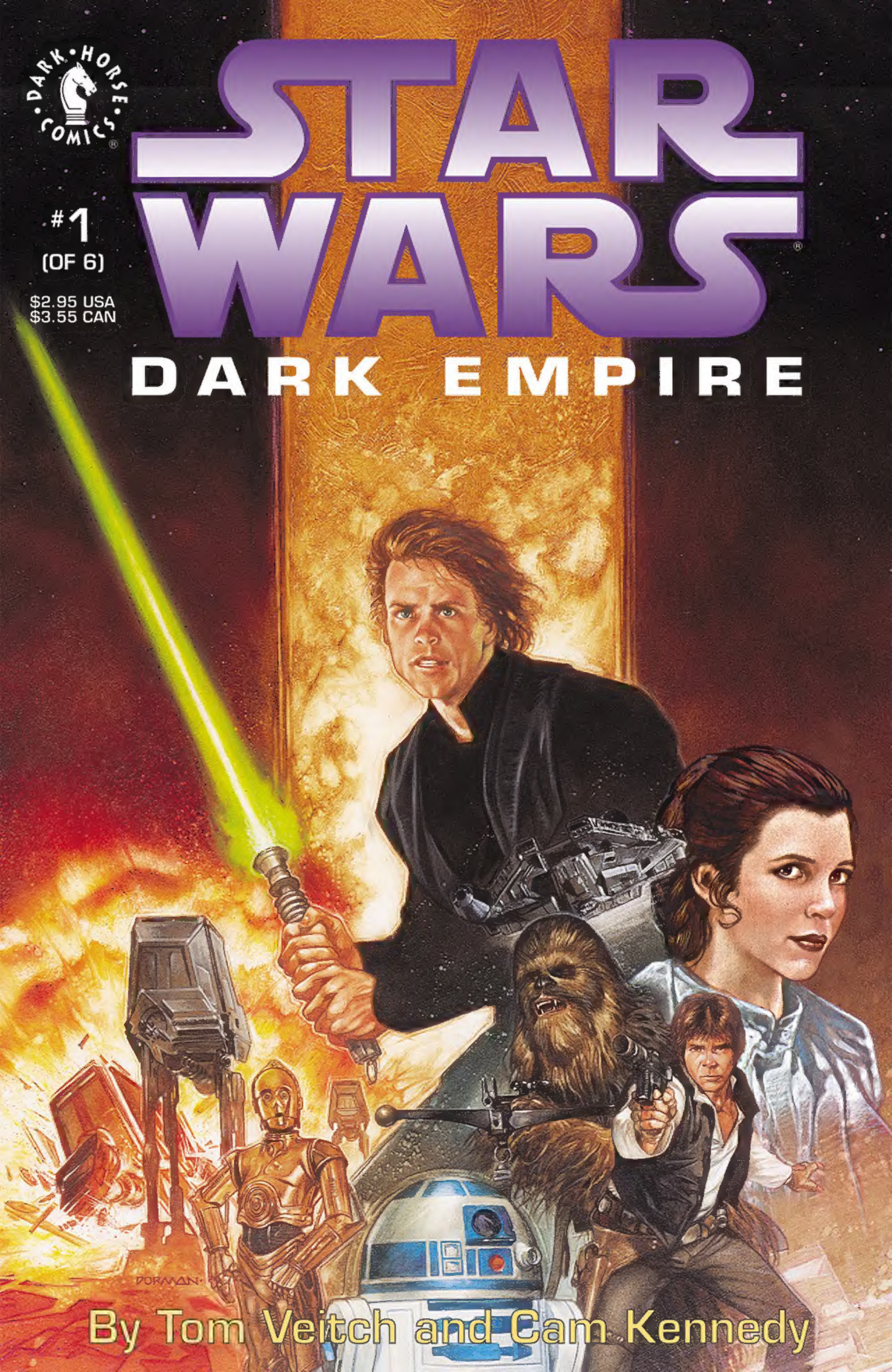
DARK EMPIRE



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BOOK 1:
THE DESTINY OF A JEDI

Following the deaths of Darth Vader and the Emperor and the destruction of the second Death Star, the Rebel Alliance proclaimed a New Republic over three-fourths of the Galaxy. But without the thousands of Jedi Knights who formed the backbone of the Old Republic, the new confederation was a precarious one.

Long years of struggle ensued, during which the Imperials regained strength, pushing back the Alliance until the majority of worlds, including the vital Imperial System, fell once again under Imperial control.

Then, without warning, civil war erupted, as factions within the Imperial Navy battled the former Emperor's ruling circle for control of the Empire.

The Rebels seized the opportunity to sow confusion among the feuding Imperials, using captured Star Destroyers to conduct hit-and-run sorties into the war zones.

One such raid, over the raging Imperial City battleground, ended in disaster: the Alliance Star Destroyer Liberator, commanded by Luke Skywalker and Lando Calrissian, crashed on the planet's surface. Only Luke's skillful use of the ship's deflector shields and anti-grav braking system prevented all aboard from being killed.

As our story opens, Princess Leia Organa and her husband Han Solo, together with the Wookiee Chewbacca and the protocol droid C-3PO, are on a daring mission to rescue their fallen comrades.

HAN-- THE NAVICOMPUTER JUST REPORTED EXTREME *TURBULENCE* AT OUR REENTRY COORDINATES.

THAT'LL BE *BATTLE DEBRIS*, LEIA! THE WHOLE IMPERIAL SECTOR IS LITTERED WITH IT!

WARN THE OTHER SHIPS, CHEWIE!...AND PREPARE TO EXIT HYPERSPACE!

SIR, THE ODDS OF *COLLISION* WITH THE SPACE DEBRIS ARE 3,722 TO ONE ... IF I MAY SUGGEST--

CHEWIE! WATCH YOUR *THRUSTERS!*

NRAWWUNNN!

...AND REMIND ME TO CROSSWIRE GOLDENROD'S *VOICE SYNTHESIZER* WHEN WE GET BACK TO BASE!

BUT, SIR, IF I MAY SAY SO--

THREEPIO, *SIT DOWN!*

FIVE SECONDS TO REENTRY!

STARSHIP WRECKAGE DEAD AHEAD! THRUSTERS FULL RIGHT!

THE *MILLENNIUM FALCON*, RETROFITTED WITH THE LATEST LIGHTSPEED ION ENGINES, BURSTS OUT OF HYPERSPACE AMIDST THE WRECKAGE OF A *GREAT SPACE BATTLE!*

NNNWARRAR!

THE ALLIANCE ESCORT FRIGATES *REBEL STAR* AND *ANTARES SIX* ARE RIGHT BEHIND THE FALCON...

ANTARES SIX FINDS A PATH THROUGH THE DESTRUCTION... *REBEL STAR* IS *NOT* SO LUCKY!

CAPTAIN NEVA'S FRIGATE IS *HIT!* THAT LEAVES THE *ANTARES SIX* TO HELP US FIND LUKE AND LANDO.

YEAH, *NICE* SITUATION. LUKE CRASHES A CAPTURED STAR DESTROYER...AND *WE* JUST LOST A GOOD FRIGATE CREW...

I STILL THINK WE SHOULD ALL HAVE STAYED HOME--

--BESIDES, LUKE AND LANDO DON'T NEED US! IF I KNOW THOSE GUYS, RIGHT ABOUT NOW THEY'VE GOT THE IMPERIALS DOIN' THE GAMORREAN TWO-STEP!

BUT, HAN--WE LOST THEIR SIGNAL! THE DISTRESS BEACON BROKE CONTACT AT ZERO ALTITUDE!

HNAWWWRUUNNH!

YEAH, CHEWIE... YOU'RE RIGHT. I'M SORRY I SHOT OFF MY BIG MOUTH.

SOLO TO ANTARES SIX... HOLD DOCKING ORBIT... WE'RE GOING DOWN TO LOOK FOR COMMANDER SKYWALKER AND GENERAL CALRISSIAN!

NYEB MLH, SOLO--

--TSUN KNETTO EIHCRA NIWDOOG, BNEF NLLE!

WHAT DID HE SAY?

HE SAID, "WE COPY, GENERAL SOLO. WE'LL KEEP YOU ON OUR TRACKING SCREENS. GOOD LUCK!"

OH-- RIGHT.

AS THE *MILLENNIUM FALCON* ENTERS THE GRAVITATIONAL EMBRACE OF THE ONCE-GLORIOUS *IMPERIAL PLANET*, A SWARM OF ADVANCED FIGHTER CRAFT STREAKS PAST--

IMPERIAL FIGHTERS! GOING OUR WAY!... DIDN'T EVEN STOP TO SAY HELLO!

MUST BE SOMETHING *IMPORTANT* ON THEIR MINDS!

THEY'RE HEADIN' STRAIGHT FOR THE IMPERIAL CITY...

...WHERE THE EMPEROR HIMSELF USED TO HANG HIS HAT--WHEN HE WAS ALIVE!

HNWWRRUUN!

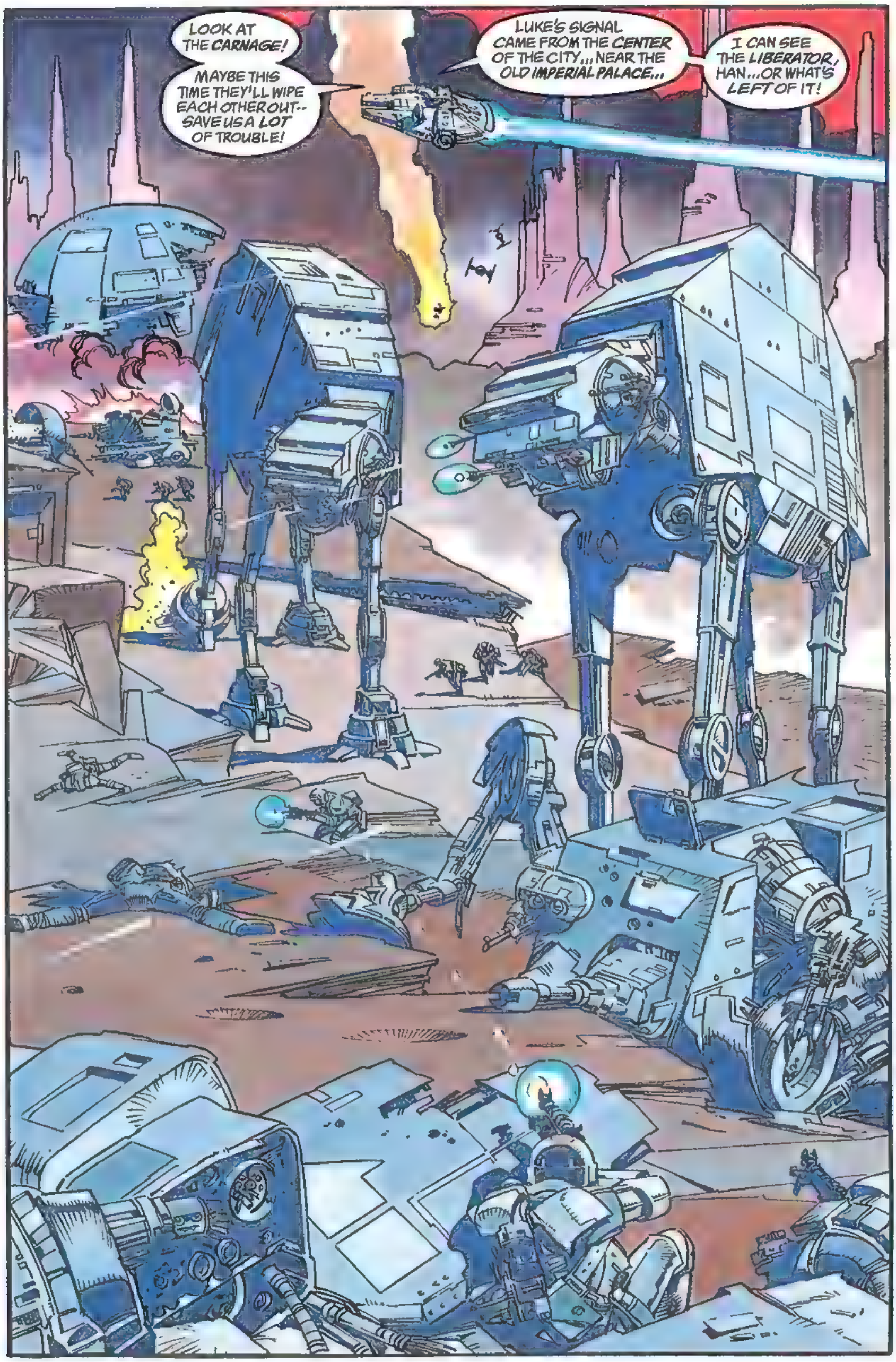
ACCORDING TO LUKE'S LAST COORDINATES, YOU'RE RIGHT ON COURSE, HAN--

THAT'S THE IDEA, SWEETHEART!

FROM ALL THE SMOKE, I'D SAY OLD LUKE PUT HER DOWN RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BATTLE ACTION!

POOR ARTOO-DETOO IS WITH THEM! IF ANYTHING'S HAPPENED TO HIM, I'LL NEVER FORGIVE MYSELF!

THE RAVAGES OF CIVIL WAR! ***MUTINOUS IMPERIALS*** ARE DEADLOCKED WITH FORCES LOYAL TO ***THE EMPEROR'S INNER CIRCLE*** FOR POSSESSION OF A WORLD THAT ONCE RULED AN ***EMPIRE!***


LOOK AT THE CARNAGE!
MAYBE THIS TIME THEY'LL WIPE EACH OTHER OUT-- SAVE US A LOT OF TROUBLE!
LUKE'S SIGNAL CAME FROM THE CENTER OF THE CITY... NEAR THE OLD IMPERIAL PALACE...
I CAN SEE THE LIBERATOR, HAN...OR WHAT'S LEFT OF IT!

SOLO SKILLFULLY PILOTS THE *FALCON* THROUGH THE CHAOS OF BATTLE, PRESSING ON TO THE SPOT WHERE HIS FRIENDS ARE FIGHTING FOR THEIR *LIVES*--

IMPERIAL WALKERS GOT 'EM PINNED DOWN!

TAKE THE *HELM*, CHEWIE--!

--YOU'RE ABOUT TO WATCH THE GREATEST *HUSBAND-AND-WIFE GUNNER TEAM* IN THE GALAXY!

I *HOPE* SO... THIS IS ONLY THE *SECOND* TIME I'VE EVER HAD TO USE ONE OF THESE THINGS...

AS LEIA GRIPS THE CONTROLS OF THE *BLASTER CANNON*, SHE REMEMBERS THE WORDS OF HER *TEACHER*... LETTING HER MIND MERGE WITH THE *LIVING ENERGY FIELD* THAT BINDS THE GALAXY TOGETHER--

LUKE IS *RIGHT*...

I CAN FEEL THE *FORCE* MOVING THROUGH ME...GUIDING MY *HANDS* IN THE TERRIBLE TASKS OF WAR--

LEIA ORGANA, WIFE OF HAN SOLO, ALREADY A MOTHER OF TWO, IS, ABOVE ALL THINGS, A *JEDI WARRIOR!*

GOT HIM!

LANDO CALRISSIAN, WEDGE ANTILLES, AND THE REBELS WHO MANNED THE CAPTURED STAR DESTROYER RAISE A CHEER AT THE WELCOME SIGHT OF THE *MILLENNIUM FALCON*.

OH, ARTOO, IT'S *SO* GOOD TO SEE YOU IN *ONE* PIECE!

BRRT-- BIP-BIP *BDWEET!*

WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG? ...ANOTHER *HONEYMOON?*

WE'VE BEEN HOLED UP HERE FOR *DAYS!*

LANDO! WHERE'S LUKE?

HE *TOOK OFF* RIGHT AFTER WE CRASHED...HE SAID SOMETHING ABOUT THE *DARKSIDE* STILL BEING VERY *POWERFUL* IN THIS PLACE!

RIGHT NOW I'M MORE WORRIED ABOUT THE *RENEGADES* AND *SCAVENGERS* THAT ARE CRAWLIN' ALL OVER THE *RUINS*.

EVERY JUNK TRADER IN THE GALAXY HAS BEEN DRAWN TO THE BATTLEZONE... LIKE FLIES TO A FEAST!

THIS BUNCH IS USING HOT-WIRED WEAPONS DROIDS... THEY'VE CREATED THEIR OWN LITTLE ARMY!

LOOKOUT! THEY'RE MAKIN' A MOVE!

WHEN SOCIAL ORDER COLLAPSES-- EVEN AN UNJUST SOCIAL ORDER-- PILLAGERS AND THIEVES ALWAYS RISE TO THE OCCASION--

OH GREAT! THEY'RE BETWEEN US AND THE FALCON!

WHILE THE WAR DROIDS PIN US DOWN, THE SCAVS ARE GETTIN' OUT THEIR TOOLS!

GNRRAWWNN!

GET AWAY FROM MY SHIP, SCUM!

HAN-- DON'T BE CRAZY!

C'MON, CHEWIE!

WATCH IT, HAN-- THEY'RE RELEASING A PACK OF **NEKS**!

NEKS-- CYBORREAN **BATTLE DOGS**... KEPT IN RESERVE BY THE CANNY SCAVS FOR A MOMENT LIKE THIS!

AS HAN'S CHARGE IS HALTED BY THE VICIOUS **NEKS**, LEIA HOLSTERS HER WEAPON AND USES *THE FORCE* TO SOW *CONFUSION* IN THE MINDS OF THE PRIMITIVE CREATURES--

LUKE TAUGHT ME THIS--*FASTER* THAN A BLASTER, AND A LOT LESS *MESSY*!

I DON'T KNOW, DEAR... I THINK I PREFER A BLASTER.

THAT WAY I KNOW THEY'RE NOT GOING TO GNAW OFF MY *LEG* WHEN MY BACK IS TURNED!

WITH UNEXPECTED SUDDENNESS A GREAT AND TERRIBLE SOUND RENDS THE AIR--

--AND THE BATTLE DOGS ARE HURLED SHRIEKING IN ALL DIRECTIONS!

RRROOOARRR

GOSH, LEIA--I APOLOGIZE! I DIDN'T KNOW YOU COULD--

IT WASN'T ME, HAN-- LOOK!

A SHADOWY FIGURE, MENACINGLY FAMILIAR, EMERGES FROM THE RUINS OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE...

THE FIGURE GESTURES... A SIMPLE GESTURE... THE GESTURE OF A JEDI--

--A GESTURE THAT MOVES, EVER SO SLIGHTLY, THE INTERNAL MECHANISMS OF THE WEAPONS DROIDS.

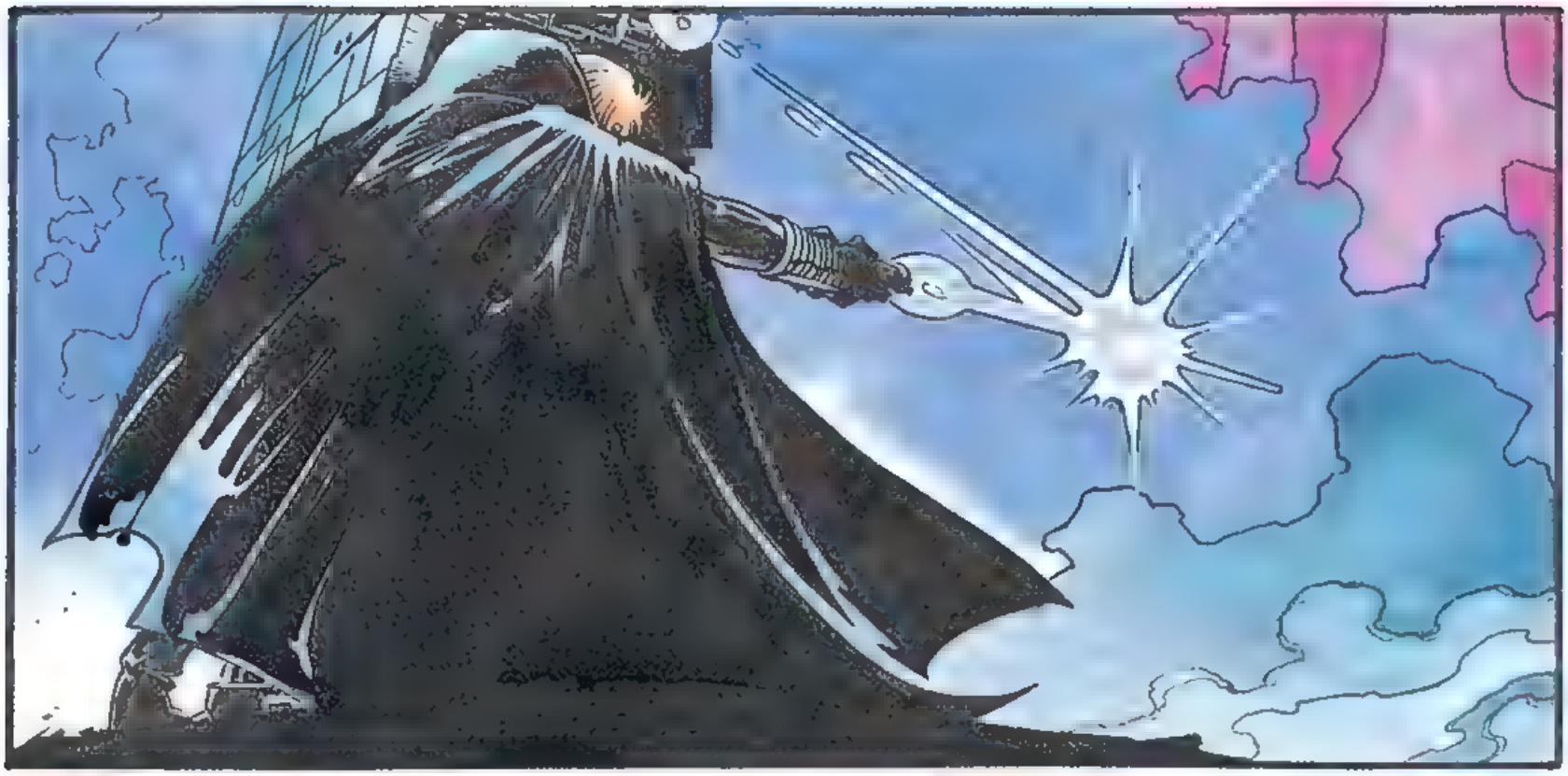
LUKE!

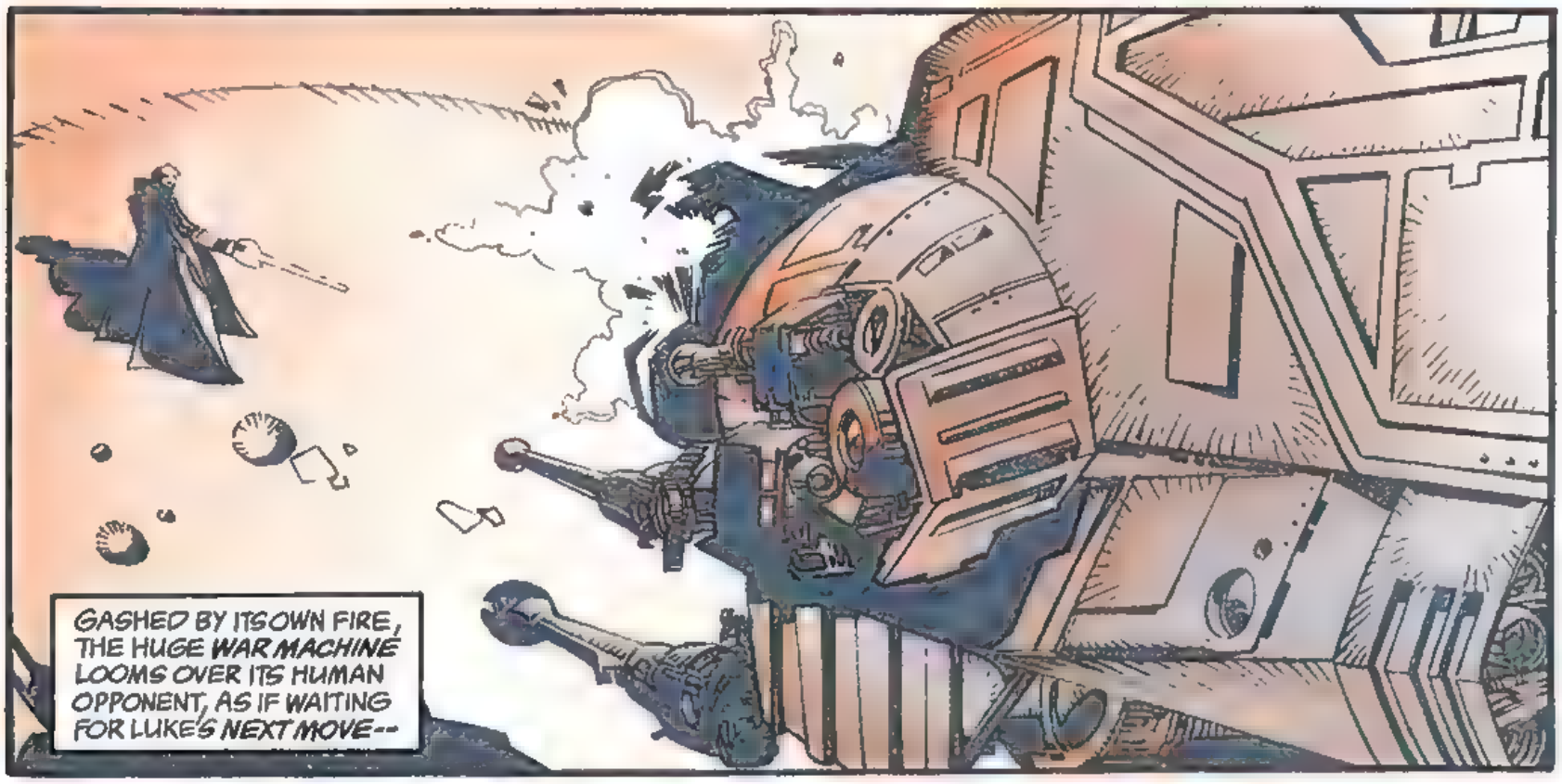
LUKE! BEHIND YOU!

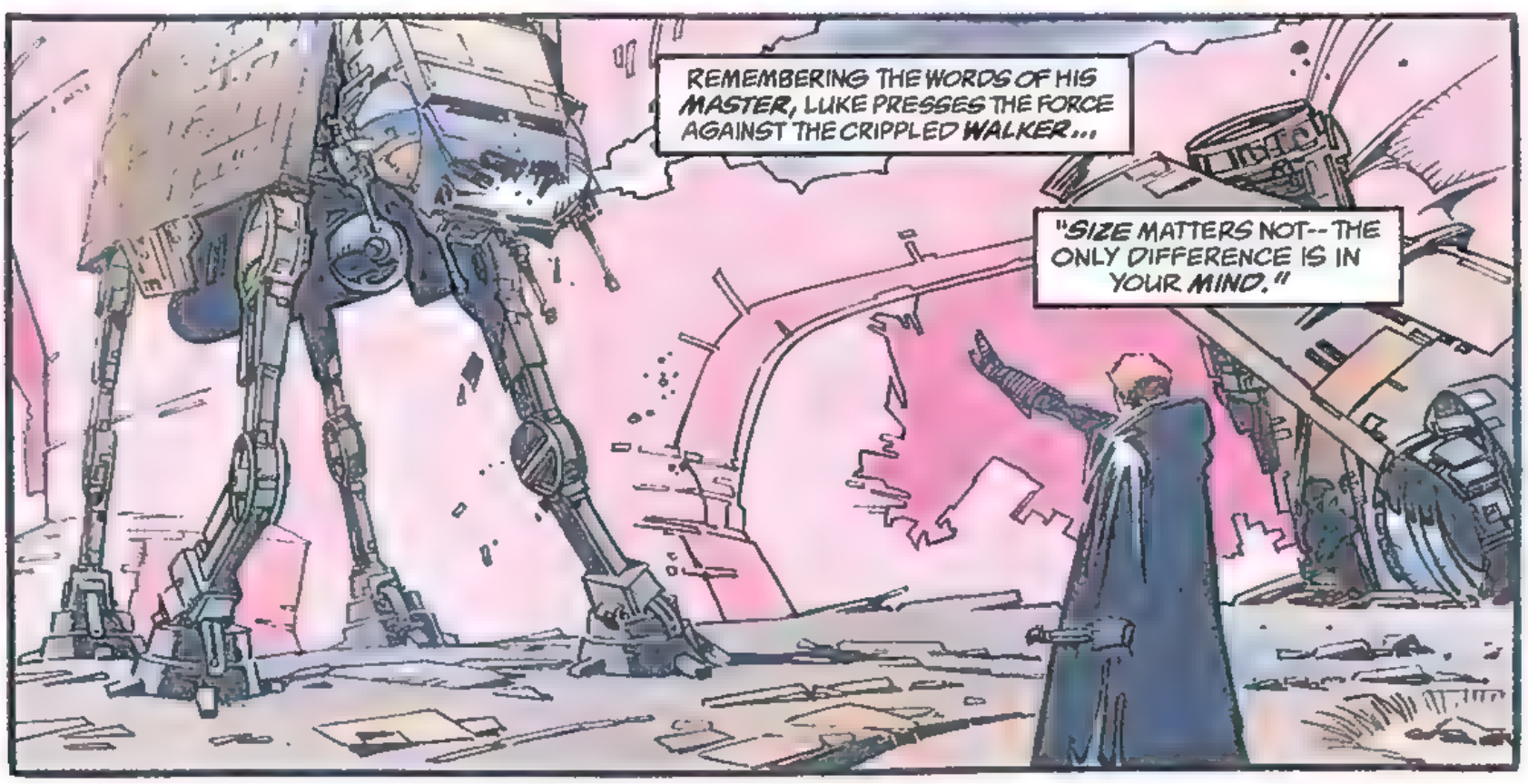
LUKE SKYWALKER, JEDI MASTER... A POWERFUL AND SKILLFUL USER OF THE FORCE...

WRUMMMM

...MORE SKILLED THAN EVER IN THE WAYS OF THE JEDI LIGHTSABER.




GASHED BY ITS OWN FIRE, THE HUGE WAR MACHINE LOOMS OVER ITS HUMAN OPPONENT, AS IF WAITING FOR LUKE'S NEXT MOVE--


REMEMBERING THE WORDS OF HIS MASTER, LUKE PRESSES THE FORCE AGAINST THE CRIPPLED WALKER...
"SIZE MATTERS NOT-- THE ONLY DIFFERENCE IS IN YOUR MIND."

THE WALKER FALLS.

AND THEN...THE REUNION OF BROTHER AND SISTER...AND FRIENDS WHO HAVE FOUGHT THIS LONG WAR FOR FREEDOM...

WHRR-TIK... BEE-BOOP!

YES, ARTOO, THIS IS *QUITE* AN EMOTIONAL MOMENT...

MY PROTOCOL EMPATHY MODULE IS STARTING TO OVERHEAT!

THERE'S A LOOK IN SKYWALKER'S EYES... A LOOK HIS SISTER HAS NOT SEEN BEFORE--

LUKE... WHAT'S WRONG?

I FOUND STRANGE CLUES IN THE PALACE... I HAVE TO STAY HERE, LEIA...

BUT YOU... AND HAN... CHEWIE... LANDO... SHOULD LEAVE THIS PLACE AT ONCE!

ARE YOU KIDDING? WE TRAVELED A MILLION LIGHT YEARS TO GET YOU OUT OF TROUBLE... AND YOU WANT TO STAY HERE?

HAN... YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. THERE'S A GREAT DISTURBANCE IN THE FORCE... SOMEONE... OR SOMETHING... IS USING THE DARK SIDE OF THE FORCE WITH UNBELIEVABLE POWER!

I'VE FELT IT... I'VE SEEN IT--

BUT YOU KNOW WE CAN'T LEAVE YOU. I WON'T LET YOU FACE... WHATEVER IT IS... BY YOURSELF!

WHATEVER THIS THING IS, WE'LL BE RIGHT BESIDE YOU, KID--BLASTERS BLAZING!

HAN, THIS ISN'T JUST ANOTHER GUN BATTLE... A VAST EVIL IS APPROACHING... IT KNOWS I'M HERE.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IS UNAVOIDABLE... IT IS MY DESTINY.

IT IS BEGINNING NOW... OUT THERE SOMEWHERE.

"IT'S COMING OUT OF HYPERSPACE..."

TSEB NLLEL WNUB!

ON BOARD THE ANTARES SIX, CAPTAIN SNUNB AND HIS CREW BEHOLD AN AWESOME SIGHT--

--A HYPERSPACE WORMHOLE HAS OPENED IN THE NIGHT... AND A MIGHTY ENERGY STORM EMERGES!

WITH RUMBLING CHAOTIC FURY, THE STORM SWEEPS DOWN ACROSS THE PLANET'S SURFACE!

IT'S ALMOST UPON US! THERE'S NO NEED FOR YOU TO DIE TOO!

IT DOESN'T WANT YOU... IT WANTS ME!

LEAVE! ALL OF YOU! OR YOU'LL BE DESTROYED!

NO, LUKE... WE ARE BROTHER AND SISTER JEDI!

THE OTHERS CAN GO. I MUST STAY.

WE ARE BROTHER AND SISTER... BUT MY DESTINY IS NOT YOURS!

YOU... YOUR CHILDREN... ARE THE FUTURE OF THE JEDI... PROTECT THEM!

LEAVE!

LUKE ALONE KNOWS THE LEVEL OF POWER AND KNOWLEDGE HE HAS ACHIEVED IN THE YEARS SINCE OBI-WAN KENOBI, MASTER YODA, AND HIS FATHER ANAKIN SKYWALKER PASSED ON...

...KNOWLEDGE THAT HAS GIVEN FRESH MEANING TO THE WORDS OF THE GREAT JEDI KNIGHTS WHO WENT BEFORE...

"DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF THE DARK SIDE."

LUKE... NO!

C'MON... HE CAN TAKE CARE OF HIMSELF--

--EVEN IF HE IS CRAZY!

ARTOO! OH, NO! HE THINKS HE BELONGS WITH MASTER LUKE!

STOP HIM, SOMEONE... PLEASE!

NO TIME... LUKE WILL HAVE TO SAVE ARTOO... WHILE HE'S BUSY SAVING *HIMSELF!*

GET ON BOARD, THREEPIO!

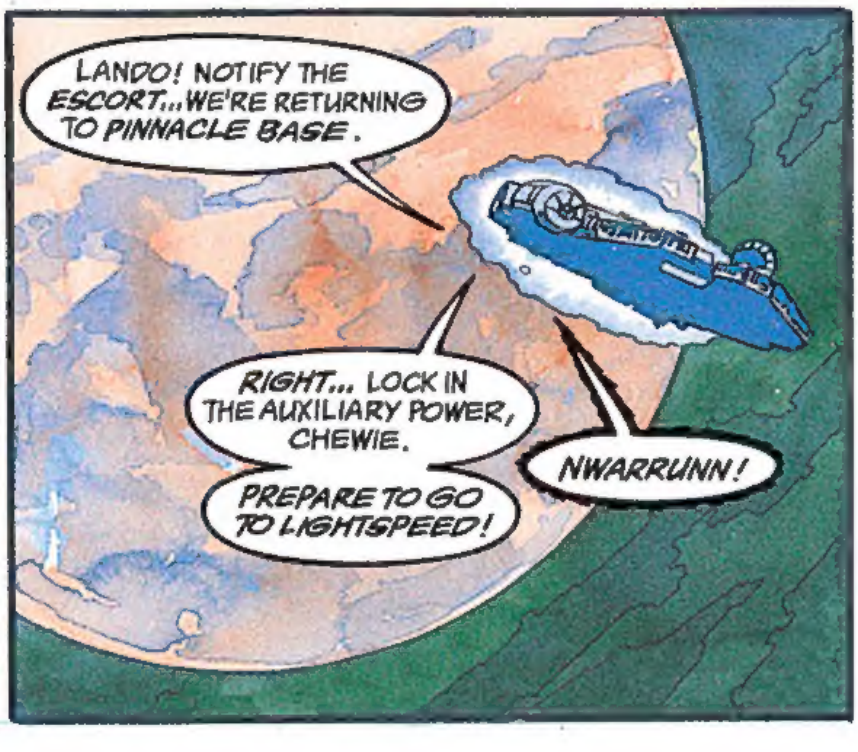
LUKE ALONE KNOWS THAT HIS *VERY PRESENCE* ON THIS WORLD HAS TRIGGERED A RESPONSE OF SUCH *HATRED* THAT IT RENDS THE FABRIC OF *SPACE ITSELF!*

MOVED BY THE POWER AND URGENCY IN LUKE'S COMMAND, THE HEROES OF THE ALLIANCE FEEL NO CHOICE BUT TO ABANDON THEIR FRIEND TO HIS *FATE*--

B-BLEEP?

AND ACROSS THE VAST DEEPS OF SPACE, TWO MASTERS OF POWER TOUCH *MINDS*... ONE THE VERY ESSENCE OF A *JEDI*... THE OTHER DARK BEYOND DARKNESS.

BELIEVE ME, LEIA... LUKE KNOWS WHAT HE'S DOING... I THINK.
I'M NOT SO SURE, HAN... SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAY HE LOOKED AT ME... I WAS AFRAID OF HIM.


LANDO! NOTIFY THE ESCORT... WE'RE RETURNING TO PINNACLE BASE.
RIGHT... LOCK IN THE AUXILIARY POWER, CHEWIE.
PREPARE TO GO TO LIGHTSPEED!
NWARRUNN!

G85